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Iraq forming government

President's request formalizes post-election procedure

By Rebecca Santana and Sameer N. Yacoub
Associated Press

BAGHDAD – Incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki cemented his grip on power Thursday, bringing an end to nearly nine months of political deadlock after he was asked to form the next government.

He now faces the daunting task of bringing together Iraq's Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish factions in a government that can overcome enduring tensions as the country struggles to develop its economy and prevent a resurgence of violence as the last American troops are due to leave by the end of next year.

The long-awaited request from President Jalal Talabani sets in motion a 30-day timeline during which al-Maliki must pick his Cabinet. Al-Maliki, known more for his ability to alienate than unify, said he was aware of the challenges ahead.

"I call upon the great Iraqi people from all sects, religions and ethnicities and I call upon my brothers the politicians to work to overcome all differences," the prime minister-designate said during the ceremony at the president's palace.

The new government is expected to include all the major factions, including the Kurds, Shiite political parties aligned with Iran and a Sunni-backed bloc that believes it should have been the one leading the next government.

The president's request Thursday was largely a formality following Talabani's reelection on Nov. 11. Talabani, a Kurd, then had 15 days in which to formally extend the offer and start the 30-day clock.

The announcement underscores what has been a stunning comeback for al-Maliki, whose State of Law coalition came in a close second in the March 7 election to the Sunni-backed bloc led by former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi. But neither bloc gained the 163-seat majority necessary to govern, leading to an intensive period of political jockeying.

A key question will be who gets to control the security ministries – interior and defense. Haider al-Abadi, a Shiite lawmaker and an al-Maliki ally, said those posts were expected to go to independent politicians not affiliated with any of the main political blocs. Such a move would avoid any risk of using the powerful ministries to settle feuds.

The Kurds, meanwhile are pushing to hold on to the foreign ministry, while Allawi's Sunni-backed Iraqiya list has demanded the oil ministry.

Associated Press
Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, right, asks Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to form the next government in Baghdad during a ceremony on Thursday.

Associated Press
A member of the ruling Grand National Party displays shells fired by North Korea in Seoul, South Korea, on Thursday.

North warns drills put Koreas at risk

United States, South have military exercises planned for weekend

By Hyung-Jin Kim and Foster Klug
Associated Press

YEONPYEONG ISLAND, South Korea – North Korea warned today that planned U.S.-South Korean military drills are pushing the peninsula to the brink of war as a U.S. military commander headed to an island devastated this week by a North Korean artillery barrage.

North Korea's state news agency said drills this weekend involving South Korean forces and a U.S. nuclear powered supercarrier in waters south of Tuesday's skirmish between the rival Koreas are a reckless plan by "trigger-happy elements" and that the maneuvers target the North.

"The situation on the Korean peninsula is inching closer to the brink of war," the dispatch from the Korean Central News Agency said.

The comments came ahead of a planned visit today by Gen. Walter Sharp, the U.S. military commander in South Korea, to the island targeted by the North Korean attack to show solidarity with ally Seoul.

Four South Koreans – two marines and two civilians – were killed in the hour-long skirmish Tuesday after North Korea unleashed a hail of artillery on Yeonpyeong, but the island was quiet this morning, with most residents having evacuated to the mainland.

The heightened animosity between the Koreas is taking place as the North undergoes a delicate transition of power from leader Kim Jong Il to his son Kim Jong Un, who is in his late 20s and is expected to eventually succeed his ailing father.

South Korean President Lee Myung-bak has ordered reinforcements for about 4,000 troops on Yeonpyeong and four other Yellow Sea islands, as well as top-level weaponry for the soldiers and upgraded rules of engagement that would create a new category of response when civilian areas are targeted.

He also sacked his defense minister amid intense criticism over lapses in the country's response to the attack.

North Korea blamed South Korean drills this week as the motivation behind its attack – but Lee said the South could not afford to abandon such preparation now.

"We should not ease our sense of crisis in preparation for the possibility of another provocation by North Korea," spokesman Hong Sang-pyo quoted President Lee Myung-bak as saying. "A provocation like this can recur any time."

On Thursday, Lee accepted Defense Minister Kim Tae-young's offer to resign after lawmakers criticized the government, claiming officials were unprepared for the attack and that the military response was too slow.

Skirmishes between the Korean militaries are not uncommon, but North Korea's heavy bombardment of Yeonpyeong Island took hostilities to a new level because civilians were killed.

Smoking's threat to others studied

Secondhand smoke kills 600,000 a year

By Maria Cheng
Associated Press

LONDON – Secondhand smoke kills more than 600,000 people worldwide every year, according to a new study.

In the first look at the global impact of secondhand smoking, researchers analyzed data from 2004 for 192 countries. They found 40 percent of children and more than 30 percent of nonsmoking men and women regularly breathe in secondhand smoke.

> "It's almost as if people are in denial. They absolutely would not do something dangerous like leaving their child in the middle of the road but somehow, smoking in front of them is fine."
> **Helena Shovelton**
> Chief executive, British Lung Foundation

Scientists then estimated that passive smoking causes about 379,000 deaths from heart disease, 165,000 deaths from lower respiratory disease, 36,900 deaths from asthma and 21,400 deaths from lung cancer a year.

Altogether, those account for about 1 percent of the world's deaths. The study was paid for by the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare and Bloomberg Philanthropies. It was published today in the British medical journal Lancet.

"This helps us understand the real toll of tobacco," said Armando Peruga, a program manager at the World Health Organization's Tobacco-Free Initiative, who led the study. He said the approximately 603,000 deaths from secondhand smoking should be added to the 5.1 million deaths that smoking itself causes every year.

Peruga said WHO was particularly concerned about the 165,000 children who die of smoke-related respiratory infections, mostly in Southeast Asia and Africa.

"The mix of infectious diseases and secondhand smoke is a deadly combination," Peruga said. Children whose parents smoke have a higher risk of sudden infant death syndrome, ear infections, pneumonia, bronchitis and asthma. Their lungs may also grow more slowly than kids whose parents don't smoke.

Peruga and colleagues found the highest numbers of people exposed to secondhand smoke are in Europe and Asia. The lowest rates of exposure were in the Americas, the Eastern Mediterranean and Africa.

Secondhand smoke had its biggest impact on women, killing about 281,000. In many parts of the world, women are at least 50 percent more likely to be exposed to secondhand smoke than men.

In the U.K., the British Lung Foundation is petitioning the government to outlaw smoking in cars.

Helena Shovelton, the foundation's chief executive, said smoking parents frequently underestimate the danger their habit is doing to their children.

"It's almost as if people are in denial," she said. "They absolutely would not do something dangerous like leaving their child in the middle of the road but somehow, smoking in front of them is fine."

WikiLeaks claims new batch of files

By James Oliphant
Tribune Washington bureau

WASHINGTON – Officials at U.S. embassies and consulates are warning allies and combing through sensitive documents in advance of an expected new release of classified files from the Internet gadfly WikiLeaks.

The documents are believed to include thousands of diplomatic cables, the contents of which the State Department said could harm relations between the United States and other nations, jeopardize national security and risk lives. They could be released as early as this weekend.

Earlier this week, WikiLeaks announced it would soon make public a trove of documents seven times larger than the nearly 400,000 Iraq war files it released in October. "The coming months will see a new world, where global history is redefined," the organization said via Twitter.

In response, the State Department began notifying its outposts, asking them to identify documents that could contain embarrassing or sensitive material, such as candid assessments of foreign heads of state or governments.

The cables "involve discussions that we've had with government officials, with private citizens. They contain analysis," department spokesman Philip J. Crowley said Wednesday. "Inherent in this day-to-day action is trust that we can convey our perspective to other governments in confidence and that they can convey their perspective on events to us."

The documents, Crowley said, "are going to create tension in our relationships between our diplomats and our friends around the world."

WikiLeaks said the Obama administration was overreacting. "The Pentagon is hyperventilating over fears of being held to account," the organization said.

The London-based newspaper Al Hayat reported Thursday that the documents show that the Turkish government allowed money and weapons to flow across the border into Iraq in support of al-Qaida forces there.

Analyst charged

WikiLeaks released a batch of files in July pertaining to the war in Afghanistan. WikiLeaks has not revealed its source for the documents in its possession, but the Pentagon has in custody a former Army intelligence analyst in Iraq, Pfc. Bradley E. Manning, who has been charged with transferring classified data to his personal computer and releasing it to an unauthorized source.

IN BRIEF

From wire reports

Drug agents find smugglers' tunnel

SAN DIEGO – U.S. authorities on Thursday found a sophisticated tunnel used to smuggle drugs between Mexico and San Diego, the second such discovery in the region in less than a month.

The half-mile passage runs from a residence in Tijuana to a warehouse in San Diego's Otay Mesa area, the San Diego Tunnel Task Force said.

Earlier this month, federal agents confiscated 20 tons of marijuana they said was smuggled through another tunnel connecting warehouses on either side of the border.

The secret passageway ran the length of six football fields and had lighting, ventilation and a rail system.

Breakaway Baha'i can still use name

CHICAGO – A federal court in Chicago has ruled that a group of self-proclaimed orthodox Baha'i believers can keep calling themselves Baha'i despite a 1966 court decision that said an earlier breakaway group could not.

On Tuesday, the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the 1966 decision, which barred a splinter Baha'i group from using the same Baha'i label and sharing the Greatest Name, a sacred and trademarked symbol, does not apply to a modern offshoot known as the Orthodox Baha'i Faith.

Adherents of the Orthodox Baha'i Faith – about 50 in the U.S. – believe the mainstream Baha'i Faith, with about 5 million members worldwide, has strayed from the religion's original teachings.

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